
The Harlem Renaissance: Langston Hughes

Why is it that some people allow their dreams to die? Is it because they don't trust the process, or is it because some people feel it's because of the color of their skin? I learned at an early age that if I constantly focused on the social inequalities in life, I may not ever reach my destination. I was determined to remain steadfast and focused in everything I do, to have faith in myself, my abilities and the willingness to persevere so I can be successful in the future no matter the color of my skin.

Langston Hughes, sir name James Mercer Langston Hughes, who was a very prominent African American poet during the Harlem Renaissance era whose writings during the start of the Civil Rights movement paved the way for African Americans in 1951. (Par. 1) During the 1920s, the United States underwent a cultural period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes' involvement with other members of the Renaissance only emerged after he attended college at Columbia University in 1921-1922. Hughes despised the experience and the obstacles he endured simply because of the color of his skin so he sought solace in Harlem and became a part of the Renaissance. In his poetry Hughes targets the issues of racism, social acceptance, poverty and the struggle to be a successful African American during that time.

Langston Hughes' "Harlem" although short, is one of his most well-known, but powerful poems. "Harlem" is full of metaphors, similes, and personification which add imagery to help the reader better visualize his interpretation of it. Hughes uses figurative language throughout the poem. "Harlem" helps depict the frustration and poses questions about the aspirations of African American people and the consequences that might emerge if those hopes and dreams were put on hold. His poem can be interpreted by African Americans as limitations of the "American Dream". During that time period, schools were still segregated, blacks worked menial jobs and had little hope for the future because society rendered African Americans as 2nd class citizens. Throughout history, African Americans have suffered the pain of injustice. These atrocities of African Americans built resentment between blacks and whites, thus the reason for this poem written by Langston Hughes.

Hughes himself was subjected to unrelenting treatment which is described in his poetry, thus the writing's he produced hit home for a majority of his readers as his feelings provoked by the issues of the time are expressed in his work. The poem "Harlem" was penned after a New York neighborhood which became the center of the Harlem Renaissance because it was a cultural phenomenon full of unique art, music, and literature. Hughes uses detailed analogies to depict images of peoples whose dreams are often deferred. Many African Americans saw Harlem as a sanctuary from the ongoing discrimination, however when the Great Depression of the 1930s set in because it left several African American families who once had prospered impoverished once again.

Langston Hughes wrote "Harlem" in 1951 and that was one of the most common themes he addressed. America was still segregated in the early 1950s and whites still had the mentality of slavery, especially in the South. In the first line of the poem, Langston Hughes posed the question "What happens to a dream deferred?" (Shmoop University, 7). He is saying that a person should not postpone or put their dreams on hold and that they should strive to achieve it.

As time progressed, change was definitely imminent. Langston Hughes wrote "Harlem" three years before the seminal Supreme Court decision in the 1954 case *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In May of 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled by a vote of 9-0 that racial segregation in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment that granted citizenship and equal legal and civil rights to slaves and African Americans who had been emancipated after the Civil war. (History.com Editors)

Then Hughes poses five things that compare "a dream deferred" to, the Raisin, sore, rotten meat, syrupy sweet, and last heavy load, and in each comparison, readers visualize the level of a postponed dream and strives to paint a lucid picture. The first line most people might interpret it as what happens to people (the dreamers) when their dreams are deferred because most of the time we often identify dreamers by their dreams. It's what that drives them. In this regard, dreams and dreamers are often indistinguishable. Next is the grape. Raisins begin as grapes, when they dry up they tend to lose their moisture and become withered while sitting in the sun. A dream, like a grape, when it's fresh, it's juicy and full of life, however when it dries up, it's just a raisin in the sun and no longer recognizable. A dream, if put off for long, festers like a sore, it is painful and tends to spread. A bottled up dream emits anger and frustration and it renders dreamers useless. Langston Hughes suggests a deferred dream won't heal or go away. Delayed dreams "stink" of resentment, a deep, dark, resentment towards themselves because they could not follow their dreams and the others who have prevented them from realizing their own potential. That line reminds readers that if dreams are put on hold, they will come to haunt us like stinky rotten meat that was left out too long. The stench would remind us to dismiss it or to throw it away. This simile outlines the goriness of the sore and may also suggest that hypothetically if the wound does heal that there will always be a scar. This particular line gives readers a sense of smell because usually everyone has been exposed to the smell of rotten meat. This represents the point between ignored dreams and getting rid of them. A deferred dream is an ignored dream, not a canceled dream. The dream, which begins as "syrupy sweet," crusts over while it waits, in vain, to be enjoyed. When you pour syrup it pours slow but spreads fast. This line refers to things that are exposed to the open and not put away properly. Hughes uses this simile to represent the negative outcome of ignoring a dream. When a syrupy sweet food is not taken care of properly, it often becomes hardened and stale. Maybe it just sags like a heavy or does it explode? Load refers to the weight of something which holds us back. The load we carry is heavy, and if it is ignored, it will grow to sag. Much like dreams when prorogued, it weighs the dreamers down. It is because of constant inner turmoil. A feeling of sorrow and regret makes the dreamers weak and thus they "sag" under the burden of life. The last sentence of the poem, the poet asks if deferred dreams explode. People, when their dreams are thwarted, will be compelled to take action against those who prevented their dreams as a result of their frustration and despair. This "explosion" will only cause destruction. It makes us think of things that have been build up in pressure over time and ready to burst. Of course all of these images are compelling enough to make the reader feel, smell, and taste these abandoned dreams since the dream deferred remains abstract and undefined. Harlem is more than just a few city blocks. It is a symbol, representing pride in the struggles and achievements of black people in America. In my academic search, it states "Through the lenses of creative writers, musicians, social activists and critics, this collection explores the ways that Hughes transformed American literature and society".